NEW YORK TIMES
27 OCT 1971

Johnson, Lyndon B.
The Vantage Point
Orig under Johnson

By Lyndon B. Johnson: '68 Election and Final White House Days

A Friendly Word For Nixon Marks End of Memoirs

INSTALLMENT XI

Following is the last in the series of excerpts from the memoirs of Lyndon Baines Johnson, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 7 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

IF I had to pick a date that symbolized the turmoil we experienced throughout 1968, I think Jan. 23 would be the day—the morning the U.S.S. Pueblo was seized. The Pueblo incident formed the first link in a chain of events—of crisis, tragedy and disappointment—that added up to one of the most agonizing years any President has ever spent in the White House.

The Pueblo, a highly sophisticated electronics intelligence ship, had been cruising off the coast of North Korea gathering data from the mainland. Between 10:52 P.M. of Jan. 22 and 12:32 A.M. of the 23d, Washington time, the Pueblo was challenged and then surrounded by a flotilla comprised of a North Korean submarine chaser and three patrol boats, and was finally boarded by an armed party, while Communist jet fighters circled overhead. The Pueblo reported that the boarding took place approximately 15½ nautical miles from the nearest land under North Korean jurisdiction, well outside the 12-mile territorial limit claimed by North Korea. Aboard the ship were 6 officers, 75 enlisted men and 2 civilians. Four men were injured, one mortally.

The ship was virtually unarmed and unprotected. This fact prompted former Vice President Richard Nixon to term the Pueblo incident a "tactical blunder," but there were good reasons for the lack of cover. The cost of providing military protection for all our sea and air intelligence operations would have been prohibitively expensive, and under any circumstances such armed protection so close to their shores would have been provocative to foreign governments.

The unanswered question was why the North Koreans had seized the Pueblo. Piracy on the high seas is a serious matter. Why had North Korea flagrantly risked stirring up an international hornet's nest and perhaps starting a war?

The North Koreans charged that the Pueblo had violated their territorial waters. They claimed that they had seized the ship only seven miles offshore. We had proof that this charge was false, not only from the Pueblo's reports, but from our own radio "fix" on the ship at the time of the incident. We did not know, of course, whether the ship had inadvertently drifted too close to shore before it was challenged, but we considered this possibility unlikely. The Pueblo was under strict orders to stay well outside the territorial limits, and given the sensitive mission it was conducting, we doubted that the captain and the crew would be so careless.

What did the North Koreans hope to accomplish? Our best estimate, then, one that I believe holds up well in the light of subsequent events, is that they were aware of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, which was scheduled to take place eight days later. They were trying to divert U.S. military resources from Vietnam and to pressure the South Koreans into recalling their two divisions from that area, for the seizure of the Pueblo was not an isolated incident. The number of border violations and flare-ups along the 38th Parallel in Korea had increased sharply in the previous weeks.

As a result, South Korea was nervous and was seriously considering withdrawing military units from Vietnam to build up defensive strength at home. One of our first actions after the Pueblo incident was to dispatch more than 350 aircraft to our air bases in South Korea and to recall to active duty selected units of the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve to replace our strategic reserve in the United States.

In response, the North Koreans promptly announced that the crew of the Pueblo would be tried and punished as criminals. This announcement pointed up our dilemma. We could not allow our indignation to dictate our response, even though that is the course many Americans would have preferred. We knew that if we wanted our men to return home alive, we had to use diplomacy. If we resorted to military means, we could expect dead bodies. And we also might start a war.

In spite of every effort we could make, in spite of our patient attempts to balance firmness with reason, and in spite of our innumerable diplomatic [illegible] before the men of the Pueblo were given their freedom. Every day that passed during those 11 months, the plight of those men obsessed and haunted me.

MARCH was a month of profound political frustrations. I was delaying announcement of my decision not to be a Presidential candidate in 1968. That delay resulted in several misunderstandings and disappointments, the most obvious of which was the New Hampshire primary of March 12 I must admit that the results surprised me. I was not expecting a landslide. I had not spent a single day campaigning in New Hampshire and my name was not even on the ballot. And the fact that I received more votes, as a write-in candidate, than Senator McCarthy—49.5 per cent as against 42.4 per cent — seems to have been overlooked or forgotten. Still, I think most people were surprised that Senator McCarthy rolled up the vote he did. I was much less surprised when Bobby Kennedy announced his candidacy four days later. I had been expecting it.

For a few fleeting hours on April 3 I thought that history had turned a corner and that the "bad days" were behind us. Hanoi responded favorably to my March 31 speech and announced that its representatives were ready to meet with us. I felt deep satisfaction in the knowledge that by refusing to be a candidate for the Presidency, I might have hastened the day when peace would come to Vietnam. But satisfaction turned to sorrow in less than 24 hours. On April 4 Martin Luther King Jr. was slain by a sniper and it became immediately clear that his assassination had compounded the danger of violence. I postponed my planned Vietnam conference in Hawaii and went on television to appeal to reason.

On June 5, while we were still recovering from the shock of Dr. King's assassination, Senator Robert Kennedy was shot and killed in Los Angeles on the night of his California primary victory over Senator McCarthy. Another voice that spoke for America's poor and dispossessed was stilled forever.

When tragedy struck him down, I was glad that my last meeting with Bobby Kennedy had been friendly. That meeting had been the result of a public promise I had made, following my announcement that I would not accept the Democratic nomination, to brief all the major Presidential candidates. Senator Kennedy had asked to see me and I immediately arranged a meeting with [illegible] after 10 A.M. on April 3 he came into the Cabinet Room with his campaign aide